

The Midwife's Apprentice

She is a homeless, nameless nobody. To survive, she must become herself.

Adapted by Bryon Cahill and Debbie Nevins from the novel by Karen Cushman

Illustrations by David Ho

CHARACTERS

(main characters in **boldface**)

Storytellers 1, 2

Narrators 1, 2, 3

Will Russet, *a boy*

Woman/Jane Sharp, *a midwife*

Brat/Beetle/Alyce,
the midwife's apprentice

Miller

Miller's wife

Merchant

Man

Calf 1, 2

Bailiff

Joan, *the bailiff's wife*

Matthew Blunt

Magister Reese

SCENE 1:

The Dung Heap

An English village, 14th century

Storyteller 1: When animal droppings and garbage and spoiled

straw are piled up in a great heap, the rotting gives forth heat. Usually no one gets close enough to notice because of the stench. But the girl noticed. On that frosty night, she had burrowed deep into the warm, rotting muck, heedless of the smell. She was used to it.

Storyteller 2: She was small and pale, with the frightened air of an ill-used child, but her scrawny, underfed body did give off a hint of woman, so perhaps she was 12 or 13. No one knew for sure, least of all the girl herself, who knew no home and no mother and no name but Brat.

Storyteller 1: For as long as she could remember, Brat had lived on her own—stealing an onion here or helping with the harvest there in exchange for a night on the stable floor.

Storyteller 2: Tonight, she settled for the dung heap, where she dreamed of nothing, hoped for nothing, and expected nothing.

Narrator 1: Morning brings the kick of a boot in Brat's belly.

Will Russet: Dung beetle! Dung beetle! Smelly old dung beetle sleeping in the dung!

Narrator 2: Boys. In every village there are boys—teasing, taunting, pinching, kicking. Always they are the scrawniest or the ugliest or the dirtiest or the stupidest boys. Brat closes her eyes.

Woman: Hey, boys, have off! You're mucking up the path and my new shoes. Away! ... And you, girl. Are you alive or dead? Alive? Good, then there's no need to call the bailiff to cart you off. Now out of that heap and away.

Narrator 3: Brat spies an important-looking woman, with a sharp nose and a sharp glance and a **wimple** starched into sharp pleats.

Brat: Please, may I have something to eat?

Woman: No beggars in this town.



Brat: Please, mistress, just a little to eat.

Woman: Those who don't work don't eat.

Brat: I will work, mistress. I am stronger and smarter than I seem.

Woman: Smart enough to use the heat from the dung heap, I see. You do put me in mind of a dung beetle burrowing in that heap. Get up, then, Beetle, and I may find something for you to do.

Storyteller 1: So Brat, newly named Beetle, got up from the dung heap, and the sharp lady found her some work to do. The girl was rewarded with dry bread and half a mug of sour ale. The next day, Beetle worked more and received more food.

Storyteller 2: The woman's name was Jane. She was known in the village as Jane the **Midwife**. Because of the woman's sharp nose and sharp glance, Beetle always thought of her as Jane Sharp.

Storyteller 1: When a new baby was expected in the village, the midwife helped it into the world. In quick time, Beetle became her **apprentice**. And the midwife gave her a place to sleep that smelled much better than the dung heap, though it was much less warm.

SCENE 2: The Cat

Storyteller 2: Beetle liked to watch the cat stretching in the sunshine. Sometimes she left bits

of bread or cheese near the fence post by the river where she first saw him.

Narr 1: One sunny morning, Beetle heads for the river. As she gets closer, she hears the cat hissing and screaming. One of the boys who had taunted her is holding the cat by his tail. His friends are cheering him on.

Will: Into the sack with him, Jack! We will see whether a cat can best an eel.

* vocab

WIMPLE: a woman's head cloth drawn in folds about the chin

MIDWIFE: a person who assists women in childbirth

APPRENTICE: an assistant, usually one who is learning the trade



Narr 2: Jack tosses the sack with eel and cat into the pond. After a time, the tumbling sack sinks into the reedy water and all is still.

Will: Ah, Jack, you was right. The eel took that cat right down.

Narr 3: A boy with a runny nose gives two apples to a boy with broken teeth, and they all run off. Beetle waits a long time before she comes out of hiding, wades into the muddy pond, and drags the sack out of the water.

Beetle: Cat, are you drowned? I'd open the sack to let you out, but I be sore afraid of the eel. Cat?

Narr 1: After getting up her courage, Beetle opens the sack. The eel comes tumbling out and slithers back into the water.

Narr 2: Beetle reaches into the sack and slowly removes the

limp cat from his torture chamber. He is seriously injured.

Beetle: Breathe and live, you flea-bitten rat. Live, I say!

Narr 3: Beetle takes the cat to the dung heap. Over the next few days, she cleans his wounds and feeds him scraps from her meals.

SCENE 3: The Miller's Wife

Storyteller 1: Jane Sharp became a midwife because she had given birth to six children (although none of them lived), went to Mass on Sundays, and had strong hands and clean fingernails. She did her job with energy and some skill, but without care, compassion, or joy. She was the only midwife in the village.

Storyteller 2: Taking Beetle gave her cheap labor and an apprentice too stupid and scared to be any competition.

Storyteller 1: Whenever a woman in the village went into labor, the midwife and Beetle went to the house. Beetle usually waited outside until after the birth. Then she came in, cleaned the soiled straw bed, and washed the linens.

Narr 1: One summer day when the midwife is not home, the miller comes to their cabin.

Miller: We need the midwife!

Beetle: She is not here.

Miller: Then you, Dung Beetle, will have to do.

Narr 2: The miller grabs Beetle by the arm and drags her off to his cottage where his wife is lying on a high, soft bed.

Miller: The midwife's apprentice is here to help you, my dear. Things will go easier now. I shall leave you to her, then. I'm off.

Miller's wife: (grabbing Beetle's arm) I no longer want this child. It was a mistake. Make it stop. I will do this no longer.

Beetle: I cannot. I am sore afraid.

Miller's wife: (screeching) By the bones of Saint Cuthbert, they have sent me a nitwit! You lackwit! No brain!

Narr 3: The miller's wife starts throwing whatever she can reach from her bedside—a jug of warm ale, a sausage, the brimming chamber pot. Terrified, Beetle starts screaming as well.

Narr 1: A crowd gathers outside

the hut, and some people push their way in. Suddenly, the midwife arrives.

Jane Sharp: Out! *Out!* Everybody out!

Narr 2: The midwife slaps the miller's wife hard across the face until the woman stops screaming. Beetle huddles in a corner. After the baby is born, the midwife spies her there.

Jane: Idiot! Clodpole! Good-for-nothing nincompoop!

Narr 3: As night begins to fall, the midwife drags Beetle back to their hut.

SCENE 4: The Naming

Storyteller 2: Soon it was high summer, and Beetle journeyed to Gobnet-Under-Green to attend the Saint Swithin's Day Fair. She went to buy provisions for Jane, because Jane had broken her ankle and could not go herself.

Storyteller 1: At the fair, Beetle passed in awe among the bright booths with flags and pennants flying. She laughed at the puppets and wondered at the **soothsayers**. She sniffed spices from faraway lands and smelled pies stuffed with pork and raisins.

Narr 1: At one booth, Beetle admires a carved wooden comb. She has never combed her hair with anything but her fingers. Watching her, the friendly merchant gives her the comb.

Merchant: (winking) Comb those long curls till they shine, girl, and for sure the boys will come running.

Narr 2: Amazed, Beetle walks to a horse trough and examines her face and hair in the watery reflection. Suddenly a man tugs on her sleeve.

Man: (to Beetle) Alyce! Hey, Alyce, I need you.

Narr 3: He thrusts a piece of leather with marks on it under Beetle's eyes.

Man: Alyce, here, what do this say? This be my winnings on the horse races. Read them to me so Cob the Groom can't cheat me.

Beetle: I'm not Alyce.

Man: Course you are.

Narr 1: The man leans in closer.

Man: Wait, you're not Alyce! You look like Alyce. Where is Alyce?

Narr 2: The man hurries away.

Storyteller 2: Beetle stood perfectly still. What a day. She had been winked at, complimented, given a gift, and now mistaken for the mysterious Alyce who could read.

Beetle: (looking again at her reflection) This face could belong to someone who could read. And has curls. And could make the boys come running. And this is me, Beetle ... no ... Alyce. This is me, Alyce.

Storyteller 1: "Alyce" sounded clean and friendly and smart. You could love someone named Alyce. It felt right.

Narr 3: The next morning, the midwife is hobbling about on her broken ankle, throwing copper pots and cooking spoons about the cottage in anger.

Jane: Get out of my sight, Dung

Beetle, before I squash you!

Beetle: Alyce.

Jane: What did you call me?

Beetle: Not you, me. My name is Alyce.

Jane: Alyce! You look more like a Toad or a Weasel or a Mudhen than an Alyce.

Narr 1: The girl goes outside to find the cat.

Beetle: I have a name now, cat. It is Alyce. Not Brat or Dung Beetle or Beetle. Alyce. And now you must have one also. Tell me what name you would like.

Narr 2: The cat purrs.

Beetle: Purr?

Narr 3: The cat purrs again.

Beetle: Purr. Very well then.

Storyteller 2: The business of having a name was harder than it seemed. A name was of little use if no one would call you by it—and at first, no one would.

Storyteller 1: But every time someone would call her Dung Beetle or Nitwit, the girl would simply state, "Alyce. My name is Alyce."

SCENE 5: The Twins

Storyteller 2: There being few babies born that September, Alyce and the midwife spent their days making soap and brewing cider and wine.

Narr 1: One day, while she is out picking apples, Alyce hears the

* vocab

SOOTHSAYERS: fortune-tellers

cries of some fearsome thing.

Narr 2: She follows the howls until she comes upon that red-headed lout, Will, and with him, his cow.

Will: Beetle, is that you? You must help me. Tansy has fallen into this pit, and I cannot get her to climb out. She is about to have her calf. Come help me!

Alyce: I am no midwife for cows, Will Russet.

Will: She needs your help, and so do I ... um, Alyce.

Alyce: I do not know what to do.

Will: Come down, and I will tell you. This is Tansy's first calf but not mine.

Narr 3: Reluctantly, Alyce climbs into the pit with Will and his cow.

Will: Good. Here, hold her head. Keep her quiet. Sing something.

Alyce: I do not know any singing, Will Russet.

Will: **Croon** a song without words, then. Just make sweet noises.

Narr 1: Alyce makes some soothing noises in the cow's ear.

Will: That's good, Alyce. Keep holding her head. Rub her head and belly. If we can but calm her, God will tell her and the calf what to do.

Alyce: (*singing to the cow*) That's my sweetheart, that's my good old girl.

Narr 2: Finally, as day darkens into evening, two calves are born.

Will: Twins, Alyce! You have brought me great luck! You have **pluck**, Alyce!

Calf 1: Mehhhh.

Calf 2: Mahhhh.

Alyce: (*later, singing to herself*) All shiny they were, and sticky to the touch. I did not even know them, but I loved them so much.

SCENE 6: The Bailiff's Wife's Baby

Storyteller 1: More months passed, and Alyce became quite practiced at being a midwife's apprentice.

Storyteller 2: One gloomy night, Joan, the bailiff's wife, sent for the midwife. Alyce and Jane hurried to her hut. The mother-to-be was in terrible pain.

Storyteller 1: Alyce dozed while Jane went about her task. Shortly after dawn, the midwife kicked her awake.

Jane: Up, Beetle. This child looks never to come out. You go in and wipe the mother's face, and I will be back as soon as I can. Lady Agnes at the manor has started her labor and wishes me to attend her. They will pay me in silver, and the bailiff in chickens and beans. God and the babies willing, I will have it all.

Alyce: Do not leave me, Mistress Jane. Do not leave her. I do not know what to do.

Jane: Do nothing, you lackwit fool. She will never deliver that baby. It will die unborn, and I will take it dead from her when I return. Let her labor while I see Lady Agnes. I will come back, do what must be done, and collect both fees.

Narr 3: The midwife leaves the

cottage. Alyce is left alone with the woman.

Joan: (*whispering*) Beetle, is that you? Where is the midwife?

Alyce: She will be back soon. And then your baby will be born.

Joan: Don't lie to me, Beetle. I know this babe is stuck and will never be born. We will both die soon, and why not now?

Alyce: Shh, mistress.

Narr 1: Suddenly, Joan shrieks as she thrashes and flails in bed.

Narr 2: Alyce doesn't know the spells or magic that the midwife uses, so she gives Joan mugwort in warm ale to drink. She rubs her forehead and belly gently with warm oil, as she had the cow's. The long day passes.

Alyce: (*singing to Joan*) That's my sweetheart, that's my good old girl.

Storyteller 2: So it was that in the middle of the night, a calmer, more rested Joan brought forth a daughter, feet first, whom she called Alyce Little.

Narr 3: Alyce washes the babe, wraps her in clean linens, and lays her in her father's arms. Just then, Jane the Midwife comes bustling up the path and into the cottage.

Bailiff: We have no need of you, Jane. Your helper here has taken care of us with her two strong hands and her good common sense.

Narr 1: Alyce hides her smile from the jealous and angry midwife.

Storyteller 1: That night, Alyce ate some cold soup and hard



bread, lay down on her straw mat by the fire, and had a dream about her mother, which upon waking she could not remember.

SCENE 7: The Leaving

Storyteller 2: Alyce was sitting by the fire one cool morning, tying up twigs for a broom, when a pounding came at the door.

Narr 2: Jane opens the door to young Matthew Blunt.

Matthew Blunt: My mum is in need of birthing help. We need for Alyce to come right away.

Jane: By the bones of Saint Polycarp, who is Alyce?

Matthew: (*jerking his head toward Alyce*) Her. Yer apprentice. My mum said Alyce helped her sister,

Joan, the bailiff's wife, when no one else could, and so she will have no one but Alyce.

Jane: Her? The dung beetle? You are asking for her, who knows nothing and fears to try and does only what little I bid her, and that none too well?

Narr 3: Jane smacks Alyce across the cheek.

Matthew: My mum will have no other.

Jane: (*sputtering with fury*) Go then, "Alyce." Such treachery! Such thievery! Eating my bread and stealing my mothers! Go!

Narr 1: Alyce and the boy run all the way to Adam Blunt's cottage.

Storyteller 1: Alyce rubbed and crooned and fussed, as she had with the bailiff's wife. She fed Emma raspberry leaf tea and

comfrey wine. Three times she called the baby forth, as she had seen Jane do.

Storyteller 2: But the baby would not come.

Storyteller 1: So as the day passed from morning to midday and Emma tossed on her tumbled linen and still there was no sign of a baby, Alyce, doubtful and uncertain, stood back from the bed and took a deep breath.

Alyce: I cannot do it.

Narr 2: Alyce sends Matthew back for the midwife.

Storyteller 2: After a spell, the

* vocab

CROON: to sing

PLUCK: courage, guts



midwife roared in, like wind before rain, blasting everyone out of the way as she set about attending to mother and babe.

Storyteller 1: She insulted and encouraged, pushed and poked, brewed and stewed and remedied. Anointing her hands with cornmeal and oil, she rubbed and kneaded, pulled and tugged, and turned that baby from both the inside and the outside until finally he was in a position to come out. Then she slapped Emma's belly, lifted her by the shoulders, and gave her a good shake.

Narr 3: Finally Alyce hears the cries of a baby, the moans of a tired mother, and the laughter of the triumphant midwife.

Storyteller 2: At that, Alyce backed out of the cottage and ran. She didn't know why or where, only that she must run away from her failure. For hours, she headed away from the village

to she knew not where. And the cat went with her.

Alyce: (to herself) I am nothing. I have nothing. I can do nothing and learn nothing. I belong no place. I am too stupid to be a midwife's apprentice and too tired to wander again. I should just lie here in the rain until I die.

SCENE 8: The Inn

Storyteller 1: Alyce found a job at an inn, working in the kitchen, trading her labor for bread and a bed out of the rain. Purr made himself useful keeping mice from the barley.

Storyteller 2: As she worked, Alyce muttered to herself.

Alyce: I am nothing, have nothing, belong nowhere.

Storyteller 1: As it happened, a man was staying at the inn for the winter. Magister Reese, it was said, was a renowned scholar. He would sit hunched over a table

close to the fire, drinking his bitter ale, pushing his quill pen furiously along.

Storyteller 2: Alyce took to sweeping that corner of the floor more carefully and scrubbing that end of the table more frequently. When the man tried to speak to her, she could only clutch tighter to her broom and sweep furiously in silence. So instead the man took to talking to the cat.

Magister Reese: This, Puss, is my masterwork, a compendium I call "The Great Mirror of the Universe Wherein You Can Find Reflected All of the World's Knowledge."

Magister Reese: This, cat, is a *P*, as in *puss*, *pork*, or *plum pudding*.

Magister Reese: The letter *S* must be made just so, never thick or wiggly or with an extra curve at the end. You see, cat?

Storyteller 1: And so it was

that Alyce slowly learned all the letters and numbers and how to combine them. She listened as Magister Reese told the cat about the heavenly planets circling the Earth, the great empire of Rome, and other bits of wisdom from his great book.

Narr 1: One afternoon, when Magister Reese spies Alyce sweeping her way toward him, he looks up.

Magister Reese: You, inn girl, what do you want from life?

Narr 2: No one has ever asked her that before. Alyce spends the afternoon thinking about it. Later, as she serves Magister Reese his cold-beef-and-bread supper, she has her answer.

Alyce: (softly) I know what I want. A full belly, a **contented** heart, and a place in this world.

Magister Reese: You ask a lot for an inn girl. I thought you'd say a sweetheart or a yellow ribbon for your black hair.

Alyce: No, this is what I want, but it is my misfortune instead to be hungry, sad, and too stupid to be a midwife's apprentice.

Magister Reese: (smiling) Not so stupid. You can read as well as the cat.

SCENE 9: Midwife's Apprentice

Narr 3: One day, Jane the Midwife comes to speak to the innkeeper. Alyce hides from her.

Jane: I have heard rumors that my former apprentice is here.

Jane: She ran away. Have you seen her? Skinny girl with black curls

and sad eyes, afraid to say boo.

Narr 1: Before the innkeeper can speak, the midwife continues on. Alyce can hear everything from her hidden spot on the stairs.

Jane: She was not as stupid as some I have had. And better company. But still, perhaps her going was for the best. She was not what I needed. She gave up. I need an apprentice who can do what I tell her, take what I give her, who can try and risk and fail and try again and not give up. Babies don't stop being born because the midwife gives up.

Narr 2: The innkeeper says nothing, and the midwife picks up her things and leaves. On the stairs, Alyce sighs.

Storyteller 2: One day in June, Alyce sat in the meadow and thought. Magister Reese was leaving the inn to return to the lodgings in Oxford he shared with his widowed sister. He offered to employ Alyce to care for his sister, as she was growing old and needed much care. Other wealthy travelers had offered her employment as well.

Storyteller 1: But the innkeeper wanted her to stay, and even offered her a penny now and then if she would agree to remain on. And then there was the midwife.

Alyce: (chewing on a blade of grass) What to do? What do I want? Who should I be? I, who was no more than a dung beetle. I, who was unwanted and despised by all.

* vocab

CONTENTED: happy, satisfied

Narr 3: Suddenly Alyce stands up, her eyes wide.

Alyce: Of course. Of course! I am not an inn girl or a companion to old women. I am a midwife's apprentice and might someday become a midwife myself!

Narr 1: Alyce bids farewell to Magister Reese and the innkeeper and sets off for the village with the orange cat at her feet.

Narr 2: She knocks at the midwife's door.

Alyce: Jane, I am back. I be a fine apprentice now. I know about babies and birthing, singing songs and cooking chickens, crying and laughing and reading.

Jane: Is that all?

Alyce: Jane Sharp, if you do not let me in, I will try again and again. I can do what you tell me and take what you give me, and I know how to try and risk and fail and try again and not give up. I will not go away!

Narr 3: The door opens. Alyce goes in. And the orange cat goes with her. ■

Hear an interview with Karen Cushman, author of *The Midwife's Apprentice*, on our blog, www.readandwriting.com on Friday, September 10.

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